

**i'll love these dark
dark hills forever**

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i'll love these dark dark hills forever by TheFlirtMeister

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Summary:

“You know I haven’t been going boxing? For weeks now?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I’ve been doing something else.” Eddie says, and then takes a deep breath, “I’ve been doing ballet.”

Richie looks at him. “You’ve been doing what?”

Billy Elliot AU

i'll love these dark dark hills forever

Author's Note:

i want to thank seph for giving me this idea, and also to my room mate's for letting me vent to them about this fic. also sorry to my history teacher for writing this au and not doing my essay.

Richie wakes up when Stan climbs through his window and jumps onto his bed. There's a brief moment of confusion, Richie grabbing hold of Stan's leg like a cat attacking a nearby ankle, Stan shrieking with dismay, and ends with them on top of one another in the bed, all crumpled limbs.

"Why are you in my house?" Richie hisses, and Stan breathes minty breath all over him.

"It's the miners." He says, "They're making an announcement."

"Fuck the miners." Richie says, but Stan has already taken Richie's glasses from the headboard and shoved them onto Richie's face, prodding him in the eye in the process. Richie squeals like a stuffed pig, and Stan hits him hard on the arm, and they wrestle on the bed for a few moments, before Stan climbs off.

"How did you get into my house?" Richie asks, sitting up to watch him. Stan's in his Scouts uniform, neatly pressed like he hangs himself up in the wardrobe instead of going to bed at night.

"Your Ma let me in." Stan says, and starts fiddling with the collection of rocks Richie has on his shelf. "You need to get dressed, something big's happening."

"Like what?" Richie climbs out of bed, stripping off of his clothes. His pyjamas are little more than a piece of fabric covering his knob, and Stan's seen it all before. They go swimming in the river naked together, and get changed for boxing together too.

"Get dressed and find out." Stan says, and Richie rolls his eyes and

shrugs on some clothes.

His favourite blue shirt is in the wash so he throws on a faded blue shirt that his baby cousin once projectile vomited over, and his jeans. They're so stiff with washing powder that they could probably walk down the stairs by themselves, and Richie has to lay on his back on the bed and wriggle them on.

"You look like a beetle." Stan says.

"Which one?" Richie asks, still wiggling, "George, John, Paul, or Ringo?"

"Get fucked." Stan says, and Richie jumps off the bed triumphantly.

"Never." He says, and then, "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Yes." Stan says, "Cornflakes."

"Adventurous." Richie says, "Let's see what Mam's made."

"She's getting ready downstairs." Stan says, "She says I should have my own key, I'm round here so much."

"You can be my latchkey kid." Richie says, and leans up to pinch his cheek. Stan pushes him away playfully.

"Fuck off." He says, and Richie pulls on his jacket which is crumpled on the floor. "We're going to be late."

"I'm coming, hold your horses!" Richie says, and pushes past him down the stairs.

Both Richie's parents are downstairs, throwing on coats and shoes and scarves. Richie pauses in the doorway, watching them, noticing how they work so fluidly without him in the mix, and then steps into the room.

"Morning son." His father says, not looking at him. "Morning Stanley."

"Morning Mr Tozier." Stan says.

“Your family alright?”

“Yeah, they're a'ight.”

Richie steps into the kitchen, bored of the conversation, and drags one of the chairs across to the table to sit at it. It makes an awful screeching noise, and Richie sees his mother grit her teeth, before continuing to tie her shoelaces.

“You coming with us?” She asks Stan, and he nods.

“Ai. My parents are already there.”

“Ah, we'll look out for them.” She says, and pats him on the head.

“What's going on?” Richie asks, stealing a piece of toast that comes out of the toaster, and his mother gives a sigh, snatching it back off him.

“That's for your father.” She says, “And it's a demonstration.”

“What's a.... demon-nation?”

“A march.” His mother explains, buttering the toast with one hand, “Put some shoes on.”

“Why are people marching?” Richie asks, and she thrusts the toast into his father's hands as he goes past, ears black with coal dust.

“Just- Just put some shoes on Richie, and we'll meet you two there.” She says, and then hesitates, pressing a sticky kiss to his forehead. “Not your best shoes. Just, sensible.”

“Okay?” Richie says, and watches them both leave the kitchen, dressed in their thick coats.

Without them in the room, the kitchen seems to open up, a vast vat of space where Richie is free to move and talk how he likes. Richie goes straight to the fridge and pulls out the butter, sticking his fingers into the neon yellow and then licking them appreciatively.

“You're disgusting.” Stan says, but when Richie offers the butter to

him, he sticks his fingers in and all.

They stand there for a minute or so, eating the butter, before Stan relents wiping his fingers on his shirt. "We need to get going."

"Do we have to?"

"Yes?" Stan replies, and Richie sucks his fingers clean.

"Alright then." He says, shoving the butter back into the fridge and slamming the door shut. "Shoes?"

"Over there." Stan says, and Richie puts them on standing up, wobbling a bit in the hope that Stan will reach out and steady him.

Instead Stan goes to the front door, hauling it open, and waits. Richie flushes, tying up his laces, and quickly joins him, running buttery fingers through his hair.

"Key?" Stan asks.

Richie lifts the piece of rope he's got around his neck, key dangling from the bottom. "Got it."

"Good." Stan says, and they step out to join the miners strike of 1984.

Richie and Stan join on the march at the back, so cold that their breath can be seen in front of their faces. The people walking round them are stoic, marching with purpose, long strides with big legs. Richie stumbles to keep up with them, Stan having no trouble with his legs the size of rugby posts.

"Where we going?" Richie asks Stan, and Stan peers over the crowd, jumping up to see clearly.

"I think we're going to the square." He says, "I can see lots of people."

"See anyone we know?" Richie asks, and Stan bites his lip.

"I know the adults." He says finally, and then drops down beside Richie. "There are kids though. Our age. And older."

“The Bowers gang?”

“No sign.” Stan grins at Richie ruefully “It's too early for them, innit?”

Richie laughs at that, because he's tired too, so fucking tired. “They're missing out.”

“Exactly.” Stan says, and they fall into silence because it's too cold to speak.

By the time they get to the square, it's still flipping freezing. Richie jumps about a bit trying to keep warm, and gets glared at by several adults. Richie mutters swears under his breath, and rubs at his arms, and tries not to focus on the fact that his balls are retracting into his body.

There are more people in the square, and Richie knows them. There's Beverly and her Dad, Bill Denbrough holding his little brother Georgie by the arm to stop him running off, Ben Hanson, who is soft and plump like a mound of candy floss. Mike Hanlon is also there, the only black family in the town. Sometimes, when Richie's Dad comes out the mines, he could be mistaken for one of Mike's uncles. Richie shook Mike's hand after a football game once, and Henry Bowers had stomped on Richie's hand and told him not to touch dirt.

Eddie Kaspbrak is standing on the sidelines, his mother not near him, but her presence felt. Eddie looks sickly, deathly even, and he's not wearing trousers, only a pair of shorts that show off his knobbly knees. He has his arms wrapped around himself to fight off the cold, and when he looks up, he accidentally catches Richie's eye.

Richie walks over to him, Stan following behind. “Alright?” He asks with a nod.

“Alright” Eddie replies, nodding back. An icy wind blows harsh, and they bracket themselves against it.

“Do you know why they're on strike like?” Richie asks, and Eddie shrugs.

“It's to do with Maggie Thatcher, innit?” He says, and Stan sighs, rolls

his eyes, quickly becoming The One Who Knows Things.

"She's closing the mines." He says, and Eddie blinks up at him.

"Why though?"

"There's too many men, innit?" Stan says, spreading his hands to explain, "Nobody wants coal no more. So she has to close the mines."

"But that's our Dads out there." Richie says, speaking for himself and not Eddie. "They'll have no jobs."

"Exactly like." Stan says, "That's the problem."

"Oh." Richie says, and watches the men who are crowded round. They're a working lot, big men who are covered in coal dust, no matter how hard they scrub on a Sunday wash. They've got working men's hands, and working men's feet, and working men's lungs. Where is everyone meant to go?

"I hate Thatcher." Eddie says, with enough hate that it makes Richie turn round to look at him.

"Your Da's not down a mine though."

"I still hate her." Eddie says, and musters enough saliva to gob onto the ground. They all look at the pathetic puddle of it, and then Richie sucks up his mouth, and spits onto the ground too.

"Fuck Thatcher." He says.

"Disgusting." Stan says, and gobs on the ground and all.

Richie opens his mouth to say something, when someone lays the flat of their hand against the small of his back. He whirls round, indignant, and his mother looks back at him, tired. She runs her eyes over his face, studying him, and then pulls him into a tight hug.

"Mam." He whines, pulling away from her, "My friends are here."

"And they should all be going to their mother's too." His mam says, looking at Stan and Eddie over the top of Richie's head. "I'm sure

conversations need to be had.”

“What kind of conversations?” Richie asks, and she strokes his face with her hand.

“The men are striking.” She says, and Richie blinks.

“But that means they won't go to work at all.”

“Exactly.” She says, “Things are going to be hard from now on. No more treats.”

“I didn't have treats anyway.” Richie grumbles, and she pinches his arm hard. “Ow!”

“I didn't do anything to you.” She says, and then a shadow overcast them all. “Oh, hello Mrs Kaspbrak.”

Eddie's mother is the biggest woman that Richie has ever known. He doesn't know how she ever got so big, Eddie's as poor as the rest of them, and he himself is as skinny as a stick insect. His mother is tall and wide, like a fridge, and she smells of cat wee.

“Terrible news about the men.” She says, and Richie's mother nods.

“Terrible.” She agrees. “But worth it.”

“Mm.” Eddie's mother says, and squeezes Eddie's shoulders. “I'm glad my Eddie isn't old enough to go down a mine yet.”

“Me too.” Richie's mother says, “But you know, if Eddie ever wants to have tea at ours, just let us know. We have to bond together, solidarity and all that.”

Eddie's mother pulls a face that makes it perfectly clear that Eddie will never be allowed through Richie's front door. “Of course,” She says instead, “I'll let you know Maggie.”

“Wonderful, Sonia.” Richie's mother says briskly, and then turns away. “Oh, my husband is calling. Richie, don't get into any trouble.”

“I never do!” Richie protests, and everyone gathered around him

gives him a look. His mother pats him on the arm and then strides off, to where Richie's father is talking with some of the other men.

"Well then," Eddie's mother says, and releases her grip on Eddie. "Come along Edward. Mummy thinks you might catch your death of cold out here."

Eddie, who is wearing three times more layers than Richie and Stan put together nods his head. "Okay." He says, and his mother has already started to waddle away.

"We'll see you at boxing?" Richie says, and Eddie nods, looking down at the ground.

"Yeah, see you there." He says.

"See you Eddie." Stan says, and Eddie scuffs his shoe on the ground.

"See you Stanley. See you Richie."

"Edward!" Eddie's mother yells from a little way away, "Come along!"

"Coming!" Eddie yells, and runs after him, tripping a little on the uneven ground.

"You know I'd like him," Stan says, watching Eddie race off, coat flapping behind him like Superman's cape, "If he wasn't such a shit boxer."

Richie snorts, punches Stan on the side, but it's true. Watching Eddie box is like trying to watch a spider try and turn right side up when it's on its back. Legs everywhere, and the general aura of crushing despair.

"Want to throw stones at cars from the bridge?" Richie asks Stan, who hesitates for a second.

"Yeah, go on then." He says, and Richie grins.

*

Stan is in bed with a cold by the time the next boxing session comes around, and his mother refuses to let him go. Richie stands at the foot of Stan's bed, where someone has carefully mapped out a quarantine line with socks, and stares at Stan, who is bundled up in the covers with a hot water bottle.

"It's gonna be dead boring at boxing without you." Richie says. "Who am I going to take the piss out of?"

"Eddie?" Stan suggests, whose skin is a ghastly shade of green, and Richie shrugs.

"I guess. Not as fun though." He wishes he could sit down on the edge of the bed, but Stan's feet are poking out the end of the bed comically. He hasn't had a new bed since he was old enough to move into his cousin's hand-me-down.

"Haystack's joined, hasn't he?" Stan asks, and Richie nods.

"Yeah. I feel bad for him though, he's new and all."

"Toughen him up a bit." Stan says, and takes a sip of the warm black current juice his mother has made for him. Richie watches him enviously.

"Are you sure you're too sick to go to boxing?" He asks, and Stan nods.

"Go on without me." Stan croaks, "I'm dying."

"No you're not."

"Dying very hard." Stan starts to sink down under the covers, "Fading, fading.... I see the lights... So bright..."

"Is a hot woman meeting you at the gate?" Richie asks.

"Yes." Stan says, voice muffled from the duvet over his head, "She's got huge boobs."

"Godspeed my friend." Richie says seriously, and touches Stan on the foot. "Get better soon."

"Don't get punched too much." Stan says.

"I'll try not to." Richie promises, and leaves the room.

Stan's mother, Andrea, is writing downstairs at the kitchen table, and she looks up when Richie comes down, smiling at him. "Hello Rich." She says, and pushes her glasses up onto her head. "Sorry Stan can't come with you to boxing today."

"It's alright." Richie says, "He'll be better soon."

"I hope." Andrea says, "It's so awful when your kids are sick."

She looks down at the paper that she's scribbling on and sighs. Richie hesitates.

"Are you okay?" He asks, and she nods.

"Of course!" She says, and stands up, "Just- Working out expenses, what with the men on strike."

She ruffles Richie on the head, Richie leaning into the touch, and then taps his glasses. "Want me to walk you to boxing?"

"I'll be alright thanks ta." Richie says, and shoulders his bag, "Have a nice day Mrs Uris."

"Enjoy boxing Rich." She says, and Richie lets himself out of Stan's house.

Richie walks up the street in silence, kicking a can from one foot to the other. Normally, if he was walking with Stan, they'd, or at least, he'd, be talking constantly, about anything and everything. But for now, he is quiet.

Richie normally doesn't have a chance to think about himself. He's always talking to friends, or his parents, and when he goes to bed, he either listens to music, or he's so tired he passes out on the bed with his shoes and socks on.

Richie shoves his hands into his pockets, just as one of Ben's cousins comes the other way. Her name is Stacy, or Sybil, and she's wearing a

flouncy dress with flowers on. As she comes past, Richie doesn't move out of the way, and she bumps against him, and all Richie can smell is her perfume, sweet and fresh.

“Watch it Tozier.” She says, but there's no anger in it.

“Watch it yourself.” Richie replies, and she bumps him again before continuing on down the street.

Richie stops where he is, looking back over his shoulder at her. He doesn't fancy her, he's more impressed by her. Her dress, and the way her hair curls, and how she paints her mouth every morning with a red the colour of sour cherries.

For one brief second, Richie wants to paint his lips cherry red, and smudge his eyes with blue, and wear a dress with hand sewn flowers on.

“Oi, Richie!”

Richie jumps out of his day dream to find Eddie with his head stuck out of his bedroom window. He waves furiously at Richie, and Richie waves back.

“You coming boxing?!” He yells and Eddie nods.

“Yeah! I'm coming down- Wait there!”

Eddie disappears from the window, slamming it shut, and Richie leans against his garden wall to wait for him. Eddie's front garden is meticulously clean, it doesn't have any litter covering it, or even any leaves from the tree. Mrs Kaspbrak keeps a tidy life.

Eddie comes flying out his front door, boxing gloves slung over his shoulder. He looks pathetic, but Richie punches him on the arm all the same, and then pinches his cheeks.

“Cute!” He says, and Eddie punches him back on the arm.

“Fuck off.” He says cheerfully, and falls into step beside him. “Got your fifty pence?”

“Obviously.” Richie says and pats his pocket. “You?”

“Yeah.” Eddie says, and then, “Where's Stan?”

“He's sick.” Richie replies, “Deathly ill. About to pass.”

Eddie takes a step away from Richie. “Serious?”

“No, he's got a cold.” Richie says, and Eddie doesn't move back. “It's not that deadly.”

“A cold is nothing to joke about.” Eddie says, and they continue walking to boxing.

Halfway through the journey, they meet Bill, who has a black eye. Richie tries to press him how he got it, but Bill just shrugs, smiling, and tells him it's not a big deal. The black eye is all shades of purple and green, and Eddie makes Bill stop in the middle of the street to examine it.

“What do you think Doctor?” Bill asks, as Eddie prods him in the eye.

“You need a cold compress.” Eddie says, and Bill smiles, lazy like.

“Where would I get that from?” He asks, and Eddie shrugs.

“Got any frozen peas around?” He says, and Richie makes a big show of looking about, hand over his forehead.

“Can't see any peas anywhere.” Richie says, “Next bit of advice Doctor?”

“Shut up Nurse.” Eddie says, and Richie laughs until snot comes out of his nose.

The gym where they box at is old, built probably in the years that the dinosaurs walked the earth. The paint on the floor that maps out the basketball, netball, and tennis lines, is all scuffed and faded, but Richie enjoys walking around the lines. He imagines himself to be an explorer, following ancient mapped lines to some undiscovered civilisation.

The undiscovered civilisation in the gym at the moment are the ballet girls. They normally practise in the basement studio, but the miners have taken over it to use as a soup kitchen. Richie would much rather have soup than ballet, even though the girls are pretty. They wear pink tutus, and pink tights, and little pink shoes that give the girls trotters.

Beverly stands at the end of the line, hair sticking out all over the place like she's just stuck her fingers into a plug socket. She's scowling, ginger eyebrows knitted in a frown, and her arms are folded across her chest.

"Alright you horrible lot." The boxing teacher, Pelson, says. He's big, a hulking mess of a man, who constantly punches his fist against his hand to prove a point. "Stop staring at the little women over there, and focus on the bloody sport."

Pelson focusses on Richie, Bill, and Eddie who are lingering by the front door. "Oi! Tozier, Denbrough, Kaspbrak, you're late!"

"Bill got into an accident!" Eddie says, and Richie pokes Bill in the side.

"Yeah, he was born!" He says, and Pelson rolls his eyes, and punches his fist.

"Get changed, and get into the ring, you waste of space." He says, and turns away to cuff Ben over the back of the head. "Start warming up. If you tear a ligament I'll never hear the end of it from your mam."

Ben goes pink, flashing a look at the girls who are prancing about giggling, and Richie raises his eyebrows, because that's definitely a new development. Who exactly does Ben fancy?

He doesn't get a chance to ask any of the others, because Eddie is dragging him into the changing rooms, muttering about boxing, and Pelson, and how the girls have no right to be in the gym with the rest of them.

Soon enough, Richie's in the ring, Eddie on the opposite side. They're

flustered, both of them, looking down at their feet and refusing to match each other's sight line. Eddie looks like he's stolen Henry Bower's boxing gear, shorts and gloves comically too large.

"Where's Stan the Man today?" Pelson asks, leaning against the ring.

"Got a cold." Richie says, and Pelson sighs.

"Fucking poof." He says, and then nods at them. "Alright. Go!"

Neither Eddie or Richie move.

"Go!" Pelson says louder, "Or do I have to thump you myself?"

Richie gets into the fighting position, looking at Eddie over the top of his glasses. Eddie is a fuzzy mess of colours, and Richie gets ready to hit him where it hurts the less.

"Don't just stand there Kaspbrak!" Pelson yells, and Eddie finally moves.

He starts dancing round the ring, fancy footwork and the like, and Richie stares at him because he's acting like a fucking twat. Eddie holds out his gloves in front of himself, waving them about like he's play fighting, and Pelson gives a groan of despair.

"He's acting like a fanny in a fit!" He announces, more to the other boys than to Eddie himself. Everyone in the room has stopped to stare, even the girls. "Just hit him!"

Richie makes the executive decision to straight out punch Eddie in the face. Eddie crumples like a paper bag, hitting the floor hard, and Richie stands over him, breathing hard.

"For Christ's sake." He tells him, and Eddie wrinkles his nose up at him. "You idiot."

"You're a disgrace to them gloves, your father, and the traditions of this boxing hall." Pelson says, and Richie extends his hand to help Eddie off. "No Tozier, don't help him. Let him make his way up."

"I think his nose is broken." Richie says, and Eddie touches his nose

with his glove, effectively hitting himself in the face. “Now it’s definitely broken.”

“Get fucked.” Eddie says, sitting upright. His nose is all red like a tomato, but there’s no blood or anything, which Richie takes as a good sign. “Sir, I think I’ve caught Stan’s cold.”

“No you haven’t, you’re just shit at boxing.” Pelson says. “Christ Kaspbrak. I’ve never known anyone so fecking shite.”

Eddie looks down at his feet, tapping them to a beat that only exists in his own head. Richie watches his feet dance on the boxing ring floor, the flash of red socks against white shoes. Pelson sighs at the both of them, and reaches into his pocket.

“Here,” He says, and throws a pair of keys at Eddie’s head. They bounce off his forehead and clatter onto the floor. “Give these to Mrs Marsh at the end of the session. Be good for something, alright?”

“Okay.” Eddie says, kneeling down to pick up the keys.

“Okay what?” Pelson asks.

“Okay Mr Pelson.” Eddie replies, and looks up at Pelson with narrowed eyes. Richie suppresses a snort.

After Pelson has gone off to pick on some other kids, Bill and John Koontz eyeing up each other with clenched fists, Richie looks over at Eddie. Eddie is looking over at the ballet dancers, who are currently twirling about all over the place like spinning tops.

“Who do you fancy?” Richie asks.

Eddie jumps, startled. “What?”

Richie nods towards the girls. “Who do you fancy?”

“None of them.” Eddie says, and drags his eyes away. “Just- They look weird, you know?”

“I guess?” Richie says. “Hey, do you want me to wait for you after boxing? So you can give that woman the keys.”

"I'll be okay." Eddie says, and looks over at Richie. "Promise."

Richie doesn't push it. He wants to go back home and eat.

*

Eddie doesn't come back to boxing. Richie isn't even that fussed, Stan gets over his cold within a couple of weeks, and anyway, Eddie's mother is an overprotective psychopath. It's no wonder that she'd take her precious baby out of boxing, for fear that he hurts himself.

The only thing that Eddie's hurt is pride.

So, Richie only sees Eddie at school, or when everyone gets together to raise money for the miners by eating jam sandwiches and drinking warm cups of tea in the basement of the gym. Eddie sits beside his mother, not drinking, not eating, her rubbing his back like he's ill with a fever.

But there's this glow about him. He's got this happy wild glow of a secret, and Richie is itching to find out what it is.

Richie sees him on the playground once, talking to himself. He's playing football with Stan and a few of the others, all of them muddy and disgusting, when he spots Eddie. He's walking around the outskirts of the field, head down, and his mouth moving silently.

"Is he okay?" Mike asks, stopping just as he's about to boot the ball at Ben's head.

"I don't know." Richie says. "He's always been weird."

Richie looks over at Eddie who is walking around the playground by himself, mumbling. He's wrapped up in a thick coat, and looks more like a marshmallow than a boy.

"You should go talk to him." Stan says.

"Why me?" Richie asks.

"Because you're friends with him." Stan says pointedly, "Go on."

Richie rolls his eyes and crosses the field over to where Eddie is walking. As he gets closer, he hears Eddie's muttering, and taps him on the shoulder. Eddie jumps, turning around, his mouth still moving slightly.

"Who you talking to?" Richie asks.

"No one." Eddie snaps, "Leave me alone."

"You were talking to someone though." Richie says, "Do you have an imaginary friend?"

"No! I'm not a baby."

"Who then?" Richie asks, and Eddie hesitates.

"My Dad." He says, and Richie blinks.

"Your Da?"

Eddie nods sagely. "I talk to him- And he talks back."

"Oh." Richie says, and then looks about. "Can he see me now?"

"Yes." Eddie says, "He thinks your glasses make you look like a poof."

"Fuck your Dad." Richie says, and Eddie laughs, and the sound is so unnatural that it shocks them both.

They both look down at their feet, nervously hovering around each other, before Richie speaks.

"Want to come play footie?" He asks, "We could use your coat for a goalpost."

Eddie sticks out his arms, looks down at the thick material. "Go on then." He says, and grins.

They start hanging out more. Richie calls on Eddie in the morning, and they'll walk to school together, or Eddie will come banging on Richie's door, and they'll spend the day listening to records in

Richie's room, or go down the rec and play on all the playground equipment. It's so easy to fall in love with your best friend, hanging upside down off the monkey bars, as he screams at you to be careful.

One day Richie's walking down the road to see Eddie, when he spots him sitting on the wall. He's bundled up in a jacket this time, and he's looking at a piece of paper. Richie bounds over to him, full of endless energy, and calls out his name.

"Eddie!"

Eddie jolts, and then jumps off the wall to meet Richie. He's still holding the piece of paper, and Richie looks at it curiously.

"What have you got then?" Richie asks, and Eddie clutches the piece of paper against his chest. "No, give it here!"

"No!" Eddie says, holding it tighter, "Just piss off Richie, alright?"

"I want to see!" Richie tries the element of surprise, lunging forward like a snake, but Eddie is quicker, pulling away. "Is it a dirty picture?"

"No!" Eddie says louder, cheeks flushing. Richie's seen his cousin's Polaroids that she keeps underneath her bed, photos of herself naked, and of her boyfriend with his thing all hard. Richie had liked looking at that one.

"I want to see!" Richie says, and when he grabs hold of the paper, it tears a little. Eddie gives a screech of despair.

"You've ruined it!" He yells, "You always ruin everything!"

Richie lets go of the paper, and takes a step back. There are tears growing in Eddie's eyes, and he wipes them away with his coat sleeves.

"Eddie, I'm sorry-" Richie starts.

"It's a letter." Eddie says, and then thrusts it into Richie's palm. "There. Because you won't leave me alone."

The letter is handwritten, addressed to someone named Edward.

“Whose Edward?” Richie asks.

“Me you prat.” Eddie replies. “Go on then. Read it out.”

“Dear Edward,” Richie begins, “I must seem a distant memory.”

“Which is...” Eddie continues, and Richie darts a look up at Eddie. Eddie stares back at him.

“Which is probably a good thing. And it will have been a long...”

“A long time,” Eddie says, and then begins to recite the letter from memory, “And I’ll have missed you growing, and I’ll have missed you crying, and I’ll have missed you laugh.”

He goes through the entire letter, and Richie reads along from the piece of paper. Eddie finishes, wetting his lips, and Richie doesn’t know what to say.

“He must have been very special.” He says.

Eddie shrugs. “No. He was just my Dad.”

“What did he die of?” Richie asks, and Eddie shrugs again.

“I don’t know. He had a weak heart, like me.” Eddie unzips his coat and points at the spot where his heart is. “Sometimes I can’t feel it beating.”

Richie reaches out with his free hand and presses it flat against Eddie’s frail chest. He can feel Eddie’s heart pounding underneath his skin, like it’s trying to jump out.

“I’m sorry.” Richie says, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“It’s okay.” Eddie replies, and then nods towards him. “Can I feel your heart?”

“Sure.” Richie says, and tugs up his shirt to reveal his chest, ribs sticking out. Eddie places his small hand over Richie’s heart, and they both fall into silence.

“Congratulations Richie, you're alive.” Eddie says seriously, and they both giggle, the tension gone.

“Let’s do something fun.” Richie says, “Darts?”

“Darts.” Eddie agrees, and they begin to walk.

So Richie hangs out with Eddie, and they go to school, and Richie goes to boxing, and Eddie does got knows what. Richie doesn’t press him, because the fact is, he’s got his own secrets. His parents are out of the house a lot more now, despite the fact that his Dad isn’t at work. His mam makes packed lunches for people, and his Dad yells at the miners who have decided to continue working.

Richie’s left alone a lot, and he finds he likes it. He likes hanging out with his friends, even though he feels different to them a lot, but he enjoys his own company. He likes laying on his bed with the feet up on the wall, listening to records. He likes making his own tea, and eating it at the kitchen table like a grown up.

He likes going into his mother’s bedroom, and pulling out all her clothes, and trying them on.

He’s not a pervert. He’s not like Patrick Hockstetter, who watches women get changed, and steals their underwear to sniff. He just likes putting on her dresses, and her necklaces, and walking around the house. He even does chores like it, dressed up in his mother’s skirt and flowery blouse.

It’s the first time Richie ever feels whole. Like all the pieces have slipped into place, when he looks at himself in the mirror with a dress on. It’s enough to make him run outside and shout for joy- That is, if he wanted to get his head kicked in.

When there’s a knock at the door one day, Richie is wearing his cousin’s school dress. It’s blue gingham, pleated, and his mother is meant to be washing and ironing it for money. The dress comes down to just above his knees, and Richie has been spinning around in it all morning.

Richie opens the door a crack to see who it is, if it’s the postman or

whoever, he'll slam the door shut and fake innocence when his mother returns home. Instead, Eddie's face peers up at him, and Richie flings the door wide open. Eddie's face drops.

"Are you coming in or what?" Richie asks, when Eddie doesn't move.

"Fuck you wearing?" Eddie asks, and Richie looks down at himself.

"A dress." He replies, and moves away so Eddie can come inside. "Come on in then. Unless you want to talk on the doorstep like fishwives."

"Get fucked." Eddie says, and steps over the threshold. "Is that your dress?"

"Course not." Richie says, "It's me cousins."

"Why you wearing it then?"

"Because I want to." Richie says, and bounds up the stairs. "You can borrow one of my mam's!"

"I don't.... Richie!" Eddie calls, and then hurries after him. "Wait!"

Richie hops back into his mother's bedroom, bouncing on the bed. Her wardrobe doors are open, and Richie has been going through her things all morning. Eddie slips into the room like a silverfish, and hovers in the doorway.

"You look.." He says, and Richie picks up a tube of lipstick off the covers and very carefully outlines his mouth.

"Like a tart?" Richie completes, and smacks his lips together. "Come here."

"I don't think I should." Eddie says, "Won't we get in trouble?"

"Course not." Richie says, and reaches out to grab Eddie's arm, hauling him onto the bed. "My uncle does it all the time."

"Really?" Eddie asks, as Richie starts to apply the lipstick to his mouth.

“Yeah. Only when he doesn’t think anyone’s in the house.” Richie picks a tissue up, blots Eddie’s lipstick with it. “There you go. Gorgeous.”

“Piss off.” Eddie says, and then, “I need to talk to you.”

“About what?” Richie asks, and Eddie fiddles with his hands.

“You know I haven’t been going boxing? For weeks now?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I’ve been doing something else.” Eddie says, and then takes a deep breath, “I’ve been doing ballet.”

Richie looks at him. “You’ve been doing what?”

“Ballet.” Eddie repeats, “With Mrs Marsh. Bev’s aunt.”

“That’s her aunt?” Richie asks, “Christ.”

He thinks for a moment, at Eddie, and Eddie’s slender frame. Eddie is looking up at him with big wide eyes, and mouth outlined with ruby red. Richie wants to kiss him on the forehead like his mother sometimes does to him when he’s worrying about something.

“I can’t believe you’re doing ballet.” Richie says, “Are you trying to impress Bev or something?”

“What, by prancing about all over the place?” Eddie says, and shakes his head. “No. She did ask if I wanted to see her fanny though.”

“And what did you say to that?!”

“No of course!” Eddie says loudly. “She’s- I’m not into her.”

“What are you into then?” Richie asks.

“Not Beverly.” Eddie says firmly.

There’s a long beat of silence.

“How did you get into ballet?” Richie asks finally.

"You know when I had to take the keys back to Mrs Marsh?" Eddie says, and Richie nods. "Yeah. I joined in with the session. I'm good. Really good."

"Do you get to wear a tutu?"

"Only girls wear tutus." Eddie says, "I wear leggings."

"Shame." Richie says. "I'd do ballet if I got to wear a tutu."

"No you wouldn't." Eddie says, "You'd be shit at ballet."

"Says who?!" Richie says, and Eddie pushes him so hard that Richie falls off the bed.

"There's something else too." Eddie says, "I've got this audition, in a couple of weeks, in Newcastle."

"Newcastle?" Richie asks, "For what?"

"For ballet school." Eddie says, "But the real one, the real school, it's in London."

"Fuck." Richie says eloquently. "Can't you stay here?"

"Of course not!" Eddie says, "I quite like being alive Richie. Bowers would string me up outside the gym as a warning for other weirdos."

"You're not a weirdo." Richie says, and Eddie gives him a look, head tilted to one side, lipstick smeared across his mouth. "Okay, maybe you are."

Eddie nods, satisfied. "See? That's why I can't be a ballet dancer here."

"I'll miss you." Richie says, and Eddie pulls a face.

"You'll have Stan. And anyway, I haven't even got in yet."

"Of course you'll get in."

"You've never even seen me dance." Eddie says, and Richie nods at him.

“Go on then.” He says, and Eddie blinks.

“What, here?”

“Yes, here!” Richie prods him. “Dance for me.”

Eddie clambers off the bed and stands in the middle of the room, feet pressed together. He holds his arms out at an odd angle, and then goes up onto his tip toes, bending his legs out weirdly like a frog. He then sticks his leg out, and spins around like a musical box, eyes looking dead straight ahead at the wall. Richie claps politely, and Eddie breaks his gaze, smiling shyly.

“Wow.” Richie says, when Eddie stops. “Is your mam proud of you? What does she think?”

“She doesn’t know.” Eddie says, and Richie stares at him.

“Fuck me.” He says, “You serious?”

“Yeah.” Eddie says, “I don’t want to tell her.”

“Ballet’s quite safe though, isn’t it? Can’t really get punched in the face.”

“You can break your feet though.” Eddie says, “And your hips.”

“Christ.” Richie says, “Don’t do that.”

“I’ll try not to.” Eddie says, and sighs, coming back to sit on the bed. He rests his head on Richie’s shoulder, and Richie pats him on the arm.

“Alright?” He asks.

“No.” Eddie replies. “I’m glad I have you though. To talk to.”

“Yeah.” Richie says, smiling, “Me too.”

*

August comes around quicker than anyone could expect, and Derry is in fucking chaos. The hatred bubbles up like pus around a wound,

and Richie leaves his dressing up clothes behind to stand on picket lines throwing concrete at policemen.

The strike effects everyone. The Bower's gang get meaner and crueller, Patrick kills small animals, Victor almost kills another student, Belch strips Adrian Mellon down to his boxers and pisses on his clothes, and Henry continues to be Henry.

They corner him one day at a strike when Richie is trying to get away from the crowd and run back home. Henry grabs hold of Richie by the wrist and hauls him up to the front of the strike line where there's a face off against police.

"Look at these fuckers." Henry spits, "Fucking pathetic bastards."

"Let me go." Richie says, tugging at his arm, "You're hurting me!"

"Good." Patrick says, and runs his fingers through Richie's hair. "Little fucking piece of shit."

"Let me go!" Richie says louder, in the hope that someone, an adult, will take notice, but nobody does.

"See those dogs?" Henry says, pointing to the German Shepherds that are straining at the leash on the police side. "If I shoved you in front of them, they'd eat you for sure."

"No they wouldn't!"

"The police starve them." Victor says, "And then they set them on us working folk. They don't care if we live or die."

"That's not true." Richie says, "You're making shit up."

"Want to test it then?" Patrick asks, and shoves Richie asks.

Richie falls over, but Henry is still holding onto Richie's arm, so he dangles there for a few seconds before Henry hauls him up again.

"Fucking pathetic." Henry says, just as the bus carrying the working miner's trundles past.

"Scab!" Bowers yells, his wrist so tight on Richie's arm that he's got the slow moving feeling of a dead arm. "Fucking scabs!"

"Scab!" Patrick yells too, deafening, "Fucking bastards, scab!"

Richie goes up on his tip toes and and screams "Scab!"

Patrick and Henry both look at him, and for a second Richie thinks he yelled the wrong word, before Patrick grins and hits him on the back.

"That's right Tozier." He says, "Call them for what they are. Fucking scabs!"

"Scabs!" They all shriek at the same time, and for a second, they're all on the same side, miner's vs police, and then Henry lets go of Richie's arm.

Richie falls head first on the ground, chin connecting with the concrete. Pain rips through him like a knife, and he blinks back tears, pushing himself upright.

"Faggot." Henry says, and stomps on his arm for emphasis

The police come through the town at the end of August, and there are riots and scuffles out breaking on every street corner. Richie and Stan throw rocks at the policemen, hitting armoured uniform, and they respond by whacking them back with police truncheons. When Richie and Stan take off their shirts that evening, they each have purple and green bruises covering their fragile skin.

And in the heat of the moment, everyone forgets about Eddie's ballet audition.

Richie is in Eddie's house, sitting at Eddie's kitchen table as his mother fusses over Eddie. Eddie has a cut above his right eyebrow, and Richie told him it made him look dashing. Eddie called him a poof and pushed him off his chair, leaving Richie shrieking on the floor. That's when Eddie's mam had come in, and yelled at them both.

"My poor Eddie." She coos, dabbing at the cut with witch hazel. "Do

you need me to kiss it better?”

“I need my injuries to be kissed better.” Richie says, and Eddie kicks him underneath the table. “Ow!”

Eddie’s mam opens her mouth at the exact moment there’s a great hammering at the door. Everyone goes deathly still and silent, for fear of the police. Richie glances at Eddie, who is pale, and gripping the table like his life depends on it.

“Mrs Kaspbrak!” A woman yells, “Eddie!”

“Mrs Marsh!” Eddie says, and climbs off his seat, “I’ll get it-“ He stops dead.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs Kaspbrak asks, and Eddie turns to Richie.

“My audition.” He says, wide eyed.

“Audition?” Mrs Kaspbrak asks. “What audition?”

There’s more hammering at the door. Eddie looks from his mother, to Richie, to his mother, and then slips out of the room.

“Eddie?!” Mrs Kaspbrak calls, and they hear the door open, and then two steps of footsteps walk back to the kitchen.

“Hullo.” Mrs Marsh says, her ginger hair streaked with grey. “I’m Eddie’s teacher.”

“What?” Eddie’s mam says, staring at her. “What teacher?”

“His-“ Mrs Marsh sighs, and rubs at her eyebrows. “Listen, Sonia. Your Eddie is a very talented boy, and you have no idea what’s in store for him-”

“What the hell is going on?!” Mrs Kaspbrak says loudly, and Mrs Marsh folds her arm.

“Eddie had an audition for the National School of Ballet today.” Mrs Marsh says, and Mrs Kaspbrak’s mouth flops open. “And he missed it. I know things are tough but-“

“My Edward doesn’t dance ballet.” Mrs Kaspbrak hisses, her doughy hands on Eddie’s shoulders. “My Edward does boxing.”

“I haven’t been going to boxing.” Eddie whispers. “I’ve been going to ballet.”

Mrs Kaspbrak’s hands tighten on Eddie.

“He’s so good, if you could only see him.” Mrs Marsh says, no, pleads. “And I can get him another audition date-“

“No.” Mrs Kaspbrak says. “No. Eddie does not dance, and he does not dance ballet!”

She screams the last word at Mrs Marsh’s face, spittle flying and hitting Mrs Marsh on the cheek. Mrs Marsh raises her hand and wipes the spit away, and then nods her head.

“Okay.” She says, “Okay.”

“Get out of my fucking house.” Mrs Kaspbrak hisses. “Get out of my fucking house and never see my son again.”

“I want to audition.” Eddie says, and Mrs Kaspbrak shakes him.

“No you don’t.”

“But I do!” Eddie says louder, and Mrs Marsh shifts her bag on her shoulder.

“I’ll take my leave.” She says, but Eddie and his mam aren’t listening, yelling at each other as Mrs Marsh leaves the room.

“I’m a good dancer!” Eddie exclaims.

“I don’t care if you’re Anna Pavlona, you’re not going to Ballet school!” Mrs Kaspbrak shouts, “You are not a queer!”

“Being gay doesn’t make you queer!” Eddie cries out, “It doesn’t!”

“I can’t take that chance with you!”

“My Dad would have let me!” Eddie screeches, and his mother turns,

and even Richie shrinks back. Eddie holds firm, staring her down.

“Your father is dead!” She screams back, and it's like all the air is sucked out of the room at once. “It doesn't matter what he thinks!”

Eddie gives a terrible noise, a sound that Richie has never heard a human make before. It sounds like an angry wounded animal, and Richie watches as Eddie flips out, his arms and legs going everywhere as he fights and kicks and screams.

“I hate you!” He howls, “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!”

Richie slides off his chair quietly, and leaves the room before anyone can notice him escaping.

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Author's Note:

comment and more gay shit will happen